

Misty at Workforce Investment Board SDA-83 Northeast Louisiana Professional Healthcare Opportunities—Careers and Support Project (The NELA PHOCAS Project)

Misty Gatson says a simple scripture, 2 Corinthians 12:9, has enabled her to endure the last few years of her life: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” The “perfect life” she thought she had came crumbling down when suddenly she found herself divorced, with four young children and a fifth on the way. She moved back to Louisiana with no job, no income, and no help from her children’s father, and she had to sign up for state assistance through the Family Independence Temporary Assistance Program (FITAP). Soon she found out that FITAP had a program called STEP (Strategies to Empower People) that would allow her to further her education. Determined not to become reliant on state assistance, she decided to return to college and attain the education she would need to become self-sufficient. Her goal was to become a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN). She had been to college before, but had never been a college student and single mother at the same time. This experience was about to show her just how strong she was as well as how strong her faith in God was.

Misty began her prerequisite classes in January 2010 at Louisiana Technical College, Farmerville campus. Since the Nursing Program would not officially begin until August, she was able to participate in the Work Experience Program to keep her FITAP support. She worked as a receptionist at the Family Support Office in Farmerville throughout the summer. During the summer months, she was told that the Nursing Program would no longer be offered on the Farmerville campus. Not about to let anything stop her, Misty then transferred to a new campus (about 30 miles away) and began the Practical Nursing program that fall.

She did well until her third semester, but then “everything that could possibly go wrong did! Child sicknesses, flat tires, car repairs, ex-husband problems—you name it, and it happened.” These challenges took a toll on Misty’s school work, and she failed to attain the required 80% in Advanced Pharmacology. “I honestly wanted to die,” she says. “I cried all the way home after taking finals that day. I begin to recite that scripture; yet this time, I made it personal for me. Then I knew I couldn’t give up. The very next day, I inquired about when the next Pharmacology class would begin. I was told, NEXT year! That definitely was not going to work, so I transferred to a third campus, West Monroe, an additional 30 miles from my home.”

While waiting for the re-entry period, Misty took a part-time job as a student worker in the Financial Aid office. Between this income and her FITAP resources, she was able to pay off the student loans from her previous college experience. However, then came then bad news: because of her part-time job, her FITAP was reduced. That made it almost impossible to remain in school.

Misty heard about a program called PHOCAS (Professional Healthcare Opportunities—Careers and Support Project), one of 32 Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) funded by the Administration for Children and Families’ Office of Family Assistance. She applied for a

sponsorship and then got good news: she could be co-enrolled in STEP and PHOCAS! Since there could be no duplication of services, the two agencies would work together to ensure her completion. She completed two semesters at the West Monroe campus and then learned that, because schedule constraints, she would not be able to take the last three classes that she needed to graduate, which would set back her graduation date a whole semester. "That simply was not an option," she says. She called her second campus, Ruston, and found out they were offering all three of the classes she needed to graduate, so she got all her paperwork in order and made what she was hoping would be her last transfer.

Misty says, "Today, I am so very happy to announce that on December 15, dressed in all white, I walked across the stage at First Baptist Church of Ruston and received my nursing pin, and just two days later, adorned in my black cap and gown, I walked across the Monroe Civic Center stage and received my college diploma in Practical Nursing!"

In February 2013, Misty passed her Nursing Board exam. When she passed, "every emotion possible went through my body." Now she is an LPN with Affinity Health Group, working in its Family Practice Clinics as well as its specialty clinics. She says, "I absolutely love my job and, even more so, I love what I do. I adore the many different people that I come in contact with and take pride in knowing that nursing is truly my calling. I know in my own heart that I am truly a success story. Single mom of five beats the odds!"